RE

TV REVIEW

Charmed Is a Hollow Celebration of Sisterhood and Female Power

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OCT. 12, 2018

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Melonie Diaz, Madeleine Mantock, and Sarah Jeffery in *Charmed*. Photo: Katie Yu/The CW

I wanted to like this new version of *Charmed*. No show is more primed for a reboot than the WB's long-running, certifiably ridiculous series about a trio of witch sisters fighting demons and warlocks. At its best, the original *Charmed* displayed excellent cast chemistry, a fierce dedication to matrilineal dynamics, and a deliriously fun celebration of female power and ancestry. Now, the CW's reboot is coming at the perfect cultural moment in which questions swirling around power — how we conceive it and who wields it — have hit a fever pitch.

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Witches have long been a conduit in pop culture to interrogate female power and anger in a world that views both as unjustified. The creatives behind this new incarnation of *Charmed* — co-showrunners Jessica O'Toole, Amy Rardin, and *Jane the Virgin*'s Jennie Snyder Urman — are clearly aware of this legacy, considering how characters in the reboot speak about consent and put up posters blaring the slogan "Time's Up," and how a college campus protest about sexual assault is nestled into the climax of the premiere episode. But based on that episode, the only one made available to critics ahead of the show's debut on Sunday, this new *Charmed* is plagued by issues both aesthetic and cultural. The demon designs rely too much on CGI to feel distinctive or threatening. The decision to place the show in the fictional college enclave of Hilltown (instead of, say, San Francisco like the original) gives the show a generic sheen. The dialogue feels forced and the rhythm is jarring. Of course, many of those issues can be ironed out going forward, especially considering how much plot the first episode is tasked with pulling off. But the most glaring issues will be the ones most difficult to fix: The actresses at the center of the series lack the chemistry necessary for their bond to have gravitas, and the writing has a clumsy, faux-feminist political bent that undercuts the show's desire to provide an empowering message about female power.

This new *Charmed* takes the basic sketch of the original and twists it into a new direction. While sisters Melanie "Mel" Vera (Melonie Diaz) and Maggie Vera (Sarah Jeffrey) contend with the devastating, strange death of their mother, Marisol (Valerie Cruz), they soon discover that not only do they have a secret elder half-sister, Macy Vaughn (Madeleine Mantock), but they are also the most powerful witches on Earth. They are all united in confusion about their newfound capabilities — Macy has telekinesis, Mel can freeze time, and Maggie can read minds — but each sister reacts in a way that neatly encapsulates their thinly written characters. Macy plunges into science using her great intellect to find a reasonable solution; Mel feels motivated by this power ("This is our legacy!" she exclaims to her doubtful sisters); and Maggie, the most unevenly written of the trio, doesn't seem emotionally affected by the

situation on a deep level, choosing to instead focus on joining a sorority. I typically get a certain thrill when seeing a witch use her powers, whether it be the delightful malevolence of the women in the childhood cult classic *Hocus Pocus*, the monstrous elegance of Anjelica

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Still, the *Charmed* reboot seems to come at the perfect moment, with the perfect co-showrunner behind it. Jennie Snyder Urman celebrates and deconstructs the telenovela with such heart and pathos in *Jane the Virgin*, it's easy to see why she was attracted to reimagining *Charmed*. But from the very beginning, the Villanueva women of *Jane* felt like a real, lived-in family. So far, there is little chemistry between *Charmed*'s trio of sisters, or really amongst anyone in the cast, which makes its aesthetic and political issues all the more difficult to ignore. Perhaps that can be explained by the fact that the actresses that make up this new sisterhood reportedly didn't do a screen test together before being cast.

The show's most insidious problem comes down to a much deeper casting question, driven by how *Charmed* has marketed itself as a distinctly diverse and feminist entity. The sisters have the same Latina mother, Marisol, but three different fathers meant to create a broadly multicultural family dynamic. Urman herself said, "They're multiracial — the family is. It's part of the storytelling that we're going to be getting into." As an Afro-Latina, I grew excited at the prospect of a show about witches that delves into different cultural practices and centers on black and brown women. But only one of the actresses, Melonie Diaz, is actually Latina. Jeffrey identifies as African American and has noted that her mother is indigenous Canadian. Mantock is half Afro-Caribbean and half white. This gets into a thorny issue of both colorism and Hollywood's treatment of minorities as if we are interchangeable, casting doubt on whether the show can handle the complex political topics it interweaves into its world-building.

Take, for instance, how the sisters learn about their powers. In the original series, the discovery is primarily driven by Phoebe (Alyssa Milano), whose curiosity about her mother and family propels them into witchhood. In the reboot, the sisters learn about who they really are from their Harry Greenwood (Rupert Evans), their "whitelighter," a.k.a. guardian angel, who comes across as a bargain basement Giles from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* without the

charm, paternal care, or depth. Harry is the new head of the women's studies department that Marisol ran before her death — he brags about Roxane Gay retweeting him in his very first scene — and he kidnaps the sisters, ties them up in the family home's attic, and extols their

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misstep no matter where his true motives lie.

As Jeffrey told the New York *Times,* "I feel like we always have something to say on this show. It's cathartic." What has been cathartic, if painful, of the current moment is the conversation around women and anger. Anger is an emotion scorned in women, but especially in women of color, like the leads of *Charmed.* Yes, it can be destructive and consuming. But far more often than not, I have seen in my life and the lives of women around me that anger is a profound revolutionary force that can reshape the world we inhabit. Yet, the pilot repeatedly takes time to critique the anger Mel feels after her mother's death and laces her political mindset. Her on-again, off-again girlfriend, Detective Nico Hamada (Ellen Tamaki), notes that Mel's anger was so painful to be around, it was the reason she broke up with her. Even Maggie feels isolated and annoyed by her sister's anger.

Mel may say the right things about consent and feminism, but there are many moments in this first episode when her anger seems more like a punchline than anything else — like when she literally punches an annoying undergrad for his comments about her mother, as she puts up posters calling for a protest against a professor accused of sexual misconduct. In the end, Mel realizes that the only way she is able to tap into her power is when she isn't angry. (And when she tells her sisters, they laugh about it.) Details like this edge her character far too close to the angry, feminist lesbian stereotype, but thankfully Diaz's performance is so charming she stops that from happening. How many films or television shows made by Hollywood can you think of that treat a Latina woman's anger as a balm, a useful weapon, or powerful motivation and truly respect that emotion in all its permutations? Instead, Mel's anger is considered a hindrance, even though anger has spurned the very revolution that *Charmed* is seeking to tap into.

I may seem a bit harsh, perhaps because I'm aching for a fun confection about witches that's exactly the kind of show that *Charmed* aims to be. Admittedly, there are some pleasures to be

found in this reboot — like the surreal visual of a frozen water fountain caused by a demon wreaking havoc, and Diaz's face when Mel first realizes what she can do — but they are too fleeting. *Charmed* certainly has the potential to grow into the show it wants to be, but don't

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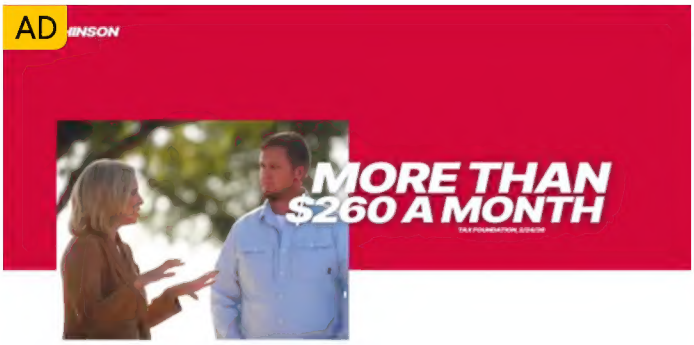

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